

Updated December 1, 2021

## Defense Primer: Military Enlisted Personnel

### Grade and Rank

The armed forces are hierarchical organizations with clearly defined levels of authority. These different levels are called *grades*, while *rank* refers to the order of precedence among those in different grades and within the same grade (e.g., someone who has been a Sergeant for three years outranks someone who has been a Sergeant for two years). However, it is common for the term rank to be used as a synonym for grade. Pay grade is an administrative classification that determines certain rates of pay, but it is sometimes used to indicate grade as well. For example, a Staff Sergeant in the Army may also be referred to as an E-6. See **Figure 1**. The Service Secretaries manage the accession, promotion, and assignments of enlisted members under broad statutory authorities.

### Numbers and Roles

Enlisted personnel make up about 82% of the armed forces, with officers making up the remaining 18%. Enlisted personnel rank below all officers. **Table 1** lists the number of active duty enlisted personnel in each pay grade.

**Junior enlisted personnel** (pay grades E-1 to E-4) typically work in small units across the Department of Defense. Individuals normally serve in these grades during their first enlistment term (usually four years). More senior enlisted personnel supervise them. Junior enlisted personnel make up about 52% of the enlisted workforce.

**Mid-level Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs)** (pay grades E-5 to E-7). NCOs have significantly more responsibility than junior enlisted personnel. They lead small units, typically ranging from a few to several dozen personnel, and serve as technical experts in their occupational specialties. NCOs at this level translate orders from their superior officers into action. They make up about 44% of the enlisted workforce.

**Senior Noncommissioned Officers** (pay grades E-8 and E-9) typically serve as senior enlisted advisors to commanders or as staff NCOs. They also serve as a channel of support for the enlisted force in general. By law, the authorized daily average of enlisted personnel in pay grades E-8 and E-9 may not be more than 2.5% and 1.25%, respectively, of the number of enlisted members in a given Service on the first day of the fiscal year. If the number of E-9s is below the cap, the difference may be applied to increase the number of E-8s. The statutory caps can be waived in certain circumstances (10 U.S.C. §517).

### Insignia





















































As shown in **Figure 1**, each enlisted grade in the armed forces has distinctive insignia, typically worn on the sleeve, shoulder, collar, and/or headgear (caps, berets, helmets, etc.).

**Table 1. Active Duty Military Enlisted by Pay Grade (as of September 30, 2021)**

Pay Grade	Services				Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force/Space Force	
E-9	3,384	2,814	1,588	2,652	10,438
E-8	10,669	7,322	3,969	4,956	26,916
E-7	34,633	22,871	8,709	26,371	92,584
E-6	59,289	51,707	13,557	44,186	168,739
E-5	70,580	72,621	22,725	61,600	227,526
E-4	119,664	54,967	31,993	61,063	267,687
E-3	54,932	47,709	45,167	48,421	196,229
E-2	21,749	16,859	19,721	8,143	66,472
E-1	13,664	10,309	10,548	8,266	42,787
<b>Total</b>	<b>388,564</b>	<b>287,179</b>	<b>157,977</b>	<b>265,658</b>	<b>1,099,378</b>

**Source:** Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center.

**Figure 1. Pay Grade, Grade, and Insignia of Enlisted Service Members**

Paygrade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force
E1	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Seaman Recruit <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Airman Basic <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Specialist 1 
E2	Private E-2 	Seaman Apprentice 	Private First Class 	Airman 	Specialist 2 
E3	Private First Class 	Seaman 	Lance Corporal 	Airman First Class 	Specialist 3 
E4	Corporal    Specialist  	Petty Officer Third Class 	Corporal 	Senior Airman 	Specialist 4 
E5	Sergeant 	Petty Officer Second Class 	Sergeant 	Staff Sergeant 	Sergeant 
E6	Staff Sergeant 	Petty Officer First Class 	Staff Sergeant 	Technical Sergeant 	Technical Sergeant 
E7	Sergeant First Class 	Chief Petty Officer 	Gunnery Sergeant 	Master Sergeant    First Sergeant  	Master Sergeant 
E8	Master Sergeant    First Sergeant  	Senior Chief Petty Officer 	Master Sergeant    First Sergeant  	Senior Master Sergeant    First Sergeant  	Senior Master Sergeant 
E9	Sergeant Major    Command Sergeant Major  	Master Chief Petty Officer    Fleet/Command Master Chief Petty Officer  	Master Gunnery Sergeant    Sergeant Major  	Chief Master Sergeant    First Sergeant    Command Chief Master Sergeant   	Chief Master Sergeant 
E9	Sergeant Major of the Army 	Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy 	Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps 	Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force 	

**Source:** CRS adaptation of Department of Defense web page: <https://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Enlisted/>, and insignia provided by U.S. Space Force legislative liaison.

### Resources

Chapter 31 of Title 10, U.S.C.  
Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, July 24, 2020.  
NAVPERS 18068F, Volume 1, Manual of Navy Enlisted Manpower and Personnel Classifications and Occupational Standards, October 2021.

### Resources (continued)

Air Force Instruction 36-2618, The Enlisted Force Structure, July 5, 2018.

**Lawrence Kapp**, Specialist in Military Personnel Policy

IF10684

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.